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ABSTRACT

This brochure presents an introduction to the Choices for the 21st Century Education Project. The project seeks to promote discussion of current issues in the high school classroom. Of particular focus are topics pertaining to international relations. Central to the Choices approach are analyzing issues, articulating viewpoints, respecting the views of others, and making informed judgments. The project offers a series of documents that draw on current research, educator recommendations, and classroom testing to develop curricular units appropriate for high school social studies instruction. Units present students the opportunity to step back from contemporary headlines to consider current events within the U.S. political and philosophical heritage. Materials are self-contained and ready for the teacher to use. At the core of each unit is a range of contrasting policy alternatives to consider. Each unit provides background readings, lesson plans, and student activities. In addition, there are materials for teachers, including primary documents, a suggested reading list, and ideas on examining related topics. Most units contain a 1-week lesson plan. (SG)

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An Introduction to the Choices Approach

Thank you for your interest in the Choices for the 21st Century Education Project. This brochure is designed to give you a basic understanding of how the Choices approach can bring informed, lively debate to your classroom.

Why Choices?

The last few years have brought momentous changes to international affairs. The collapse of the Soviet Union brought an end to the tensions of the Cold War that hung over the United States for four decades. At the same time, the familiar system of international relations and the rough consensus on U.S. foreign policy disappeared along with the USSR. Americans were left without an ideological compass. In the classroom, this historic moment affords an opportunity to involve students in redefining our country's role in the world.



Teachers across the country have found that the Choices approach can serve the coming generation as a useful navigational tool. Analyzing issues, articulating viewpoints, respecting the views of others, and making informed judgments are central to the Choices approach. They are also among the critical learning skills that the post-Cold War era demands. Tomorrow's leaders are in today's classrooms. With the help of the Choices approach, they can take an important step toward responsible, participatory citizenship.



The Choices Education Project

The Choices Education Project is an arm of the Center for Foreign Policy Development of the Thomas J. Watson Jr. Institute for International Studies at Brown University. The project draws on the research and expertise of leading scholars to develop curricula appropriate for high school social studies classrooms.

As experienced teachers themselves, the staff members of the project understand the practical needs of busy educators. Curricular units are tested in high school classrooms and incorporate the recommendations of outstanding teachers.

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Inside a Choices Unit

In today's rapidly changing world, teachers rely on Choices units for current, accurate, and balanced material on a range of vital issues. Choices units, however, offer more than a good newspaper or magazine can. The Choices approach allows students to step back from the latest headlines and consider current events in the context of our country's political and philosophical heritage. With a deeper understanding of both the past and the present, students are better prepared to participate in the American democratic process.

Choices materials are designed to be self-contained and ready to use. At the core of each unit is a range of contrasting policy alternatives for Americans to consider. Each Choices unit also contains concise

background readings, a set of lesson plans, and student activities. In addition, there are materials for teachers, including primary documents, a suggested reading list, and ideas about examining related topics.

Most Choices units contain a one-week lesson plan. Topics that feature more in-depth background readings are intended to span two weeks. Whatever the length, the units place a special emphasis on convenience and affordability. Choices units are meant to be photocopied. One unit per classroom is all that is needed. Teachers of U.S. and world history, current events, and other social studies courses have used the Choices approach with success.



Keep up with our changing world through the Choices Education Project

- *Three new units annually*
- *Units regularly updated*

Using the Choices Approach

Identifying Goals

Choices units aim to make students active consumers of information: Just as Washington policymakers must grapple with difficult issues as they chart the U.S. role in the world, so too students are placed in the role of decisionmaker as they take part in a Choices unit. Like policymakers, students are expected to apply the background knowledge they acquire to the issues before them.

Choices units help students grasp the connection between past and present: The items on our country's agenda today are tied to deep underlying values that resonate throughout American history. Students come away from a Choices unit with a better appreciation of this link. They are given a broader understanding of how current policies are grounded in divergent beliefs, assumptions, and interpretations of history.

Choices units call on students to articulate their views: As active learners, students engaged in a Choices unit have an opportunity to apply their thoughts and opinions to a public policy debate that goes beyond the walls of their classroom. They are given a context for presenting their ideas. Choices activities stress interactive group learning and promote the development of communication skills.

The Choices Framework

Students are exposed to a range of viewpoints by exploring a framework of policy choices: Each framework is meant to present a diverse range of policy options, and to identify the deeply rooted values that underlie the options. The aim is to stretch out the parameters of discussion by helping students understand the relationship between values and policy.

The Choices framework allows students to thoughtfully examine complex issues: The framework is not constrained by what is feasible in today's political climate. Rather, Choices units offer an alternative to the yes/no approach to public policy debate that pervades the media. They ask students to look beyond the latest public opinion polls and give serious consideration to the future direction of the United States.

The Choices framework sets the stage for critical thinking: Each choice derives from a well-defined assumption about the nature of world affairs, the threats facing our country, and the role the United States should play in the world. As students analyze the choices, they weigh pro and con arguments accompanying each alternative. The point, however, is not simply to choose among the options available. Rather, students are provided the tools to go beyond the choices presented and to articulate their own considered judgments.

The Lesson Plan

Days 1-2: The first one or two days of a five-day lesson plan are devoted to discussion activities and background readings that introduce students to the topic under consideration. With a solid foundation of knowledge, students are better prepared to make their own informed choices later in the unit.

Sample Five-Day Lesson Plan

Day 1: Introduction to the content area

Day 2: Analysis of key issues

Days 3-4: Role play of the policy choices

Day 5: Development of individual policy choices

Days 3-4: Before defining their own views, students approach the choices in a role-play setting. They are called upon to advocate the option they have been assigned to defend and to point out the shortcomings of the competing alternatives. The presentations take place before a panel of student evaluators entrusted with the responsibility of promoting the national interest. The role play, however, is not intended to produce winners and losers. On the contrary, the exchange of views is meant to open the minds of students and expose them to perspectives they may not have considered.

Day 5: Armed with fresh insights from the role play, students are expected to reach their own conclusions in crafting a coherent policy choice and applying it to a challenging scenario. An assessment of the same risks and trade-offs that face policymakers is crucial in this activity.

Your Classroom

The lesson plan offered in a Choices unit is a guide. The activities are designed for a high school class of 25 students. In our nation's schools, however, every classroom is unique. Flexibility and adaptability are essential. Classroom teachers have told us how they get the most out of our materials in a variety of settings.

Large Classes

Teachers often increase the number of small groups participating in the Choices framework role play by assigning two groups the task of advocating each policy option. They also create additional roles (e.g., newspaper reporter, lobbyist, etc.) to promote student involvement. In many classes, students are paired off in two-person teams to complete individual assignments.

Small Classes

Teachers often assume the role of evaluator during the Choices framework role play. Another approach is to invite the participation of administrators or other teachers, or to combine two small classes.

Students with Below-Average Reading Ability

Teachers report that they achieve the greatest success by building a whole-class activity around the background reading, rather than assigning it as homework. Teachers focus on sections of the background reading that are most relevant to their classroom. In some instances, teachers replace the Choices framework role play with a structured classroom discussion.

Advanced Students

Teachers often provide students additional resources, such as primary documents and news articles, to help them develop their role-play presentations and refine their policy options.

Fitting the Choices Approach into Your Curriculum

Choices units most often serve as a capstone activity. Many teachers, however, use them as an introduction. Others integrate them into larger units, plugging in pieces of the lesson plan where appropriate. With supplemental materials and the consideration of related topics, teachers find that Choices units can frame three or four weeks of learning. Conversely, teachers looking to shorten the five-day lesson plan usually focus on the Choices framework role play and then give their students an opportunity to develop their own policy options. As with other student-centered materials, the length of a Choices unit is largely dictated by the students themselves. Many teachers put aside the time constraints of the five-day lesson plan and instead allow the interests of their students to set the pace of the unit.

Achieving Success

Keep Small Groups Focused

Small-group activities in the classroom have their own dynamics. In working with Choices units, teachers should keep in mind that group work is a forum for the sharing of ideas and an opportunity for students to broaden their thinking. Students should come away from the Choices framework role play with an overall understanding of the policy options under discussion, while at the same time performing their specific roles.

Promote Discussion

After the role play, teachers and students have an opportunity to view the policy choices from a new perspective. Teachers find that this juncture opens the door to particularly fruitful learning. The strengths and weaknesses of each option can be analyzed; key arguments evaluated; and overlooked portions of the background reading integrated into a fuller appreciation of the Choices framework. Student evaluators should be encouraged to take the lead in this process.

Compare Student Choices

Once they have formulated their own policy choices, students should be asked to compare their approaches with those of their classmates. How, for example, did their personal beliefs shape the direction of their policy recommendations? What do their choices say about the broader question of the U.S. role in the world? Which historical lessons proved most meaningful to students?

Learn from Experience

Like most student-centered curricula, the Choices approach works better the second time around. Students generally gain confidence in articulating their views with each new unit. Teachers indicate that they, too, benefit from experience. As they become more comfortable with the Choices approach, teachers find ways to make fresh adaptations to the lesson plan.